In my family, there were always two people. First, my mother and father. Carol and John.

They danced. Hundreds of evenings at hundreds of parties in their twenties. A thousand times between songs her eyes completely closed when she leaned against him. He looked down at the top of her head; her part gleamed white, under and between the dark hair. He rubbed her back, trying to rouse her, but she became indistinct, blurring against his jacket. He hugged her imperceptibly closer, moving his hand in slower circles on her back, but when he talked it was to someone else over her head. He closed a big hand on her ear.

How do I know this? I don’t. But there was a black-and-white snapshot with my father staring at someone outside the frame. I was looking at the picture when, for some reason, I asked my mother where he was.

I was young, only four years old, and I had no memories of my father. I must have been repeating a question someone else
had asked me. My mother was ironing. It was 1960 and all her summer clothes were seersucker and cotton. Her hands stalled over the iron when I asked the question.

"He's gone," she said, not looking at me. The windows were open. A string of hummingbirds moved on the lilac bush outside. "But," she said, gathering her cheeks, "he'll be coming back."

"When?"

For a moment, her mouth wavered, but then her chin snapped back into a straight line and she pushed the iron over the perforated pink and white fabric again.

"I don't know," she said.

So we waited, without mentioning it, for my father. In the meantime, we got used to living alone. Just the two of us.

Other people asked me questions.

"Any news from your dad?"

"I don't know."

"You must miss him." Other mothers got maternal, pulling me close to their soft, aproned bellies.

For a moment, but only for a moment, I'd let my eyes close. Then I jerked away. "No," I said.

Saturday nights, we went ice-skating. We wore skin-colored tights and matching short dresses made out of stretch fabric. We skated in tight concentrated figures, our necks bent like horses', following the lines of an 8. Then, when the PA system started up, we broke into free skating, wild around the rink. My mother skated up behind me and caught me at the waist.

"This is how you really lose the pounds," she called, slapping her thigh, "skating fast."

I was always behind. Jerry, the pro, did a T-stop to impress my mother, shaving a comet of ice into the air. They skated
around together and I had to slow down to wipe the melting water from my face.

When the music stopped, my mother pulled me over to the barrier, where we ran our skate tips into the soft wood. She pointed up to the rows of empty seats. They were maroon, with the plush worn down in the centers.

"See, when you're older, you can bring a boy you're dating here to see you skate. He can watch and think, hey, she's not just another pretty girl, she can really do something."

She peered into my face with a slanted gaze as if, through a crack, she could see what I'd become.

Taking the skates off, on the bench, was all joy. You could walk without carrying your own weight. Your feet and ankles were pure air. The floors were carpeted with rubber mats, red and black, like a checkerboard. In regular shoes, we walked like saints on clouds. The high-domed arena was always cold.

The first time we heard from my father was 1963 in the middle of winter. We got a long distance phone call from Las Vegas and it was him.

"We're going to Disneyland!" my mother said, lifting her eyebrows and covering the mouthpiece with her hand.

Into the phone, she said she'd take me out of school. We'd fly to Las Vegas and then the three of us would drive west to Disneyland. I didn't recognize his voice when my mother held out the receiver.

"Hello, Melinda. This is Daddy."

I shrugged at my mother and wouldn't take the phone. "You'll know him when you see him," she whispered.

We waited three days for our summer linen dresses to be dry-cleaned. "It's going to be hot," my mother warned.
“Scorching,” she added with a smile. It was snowing dry powder when we left Illinois. We only saw white outside the airplane window. Halfway there, we changed in the tiny bathroom, from our winter coats to sleeveless dresses and patent leather thongs. It was still cool in the plane but my mother promised it would be hot on the ground.

It was. The air was swirling with dirt. A woman walked across the airport lobby with a scarf tied around her chest; it trailed behind her, coasting on air.

My mother spotted my father in the crowd, and we all pretended I recognized him too. He looked like an ordinary man. His hair was balding in a small circle. He wore tight black slacks, a brown jacket, and black leather, slip-on shoes. His chin stuck out from his face, giving him an eager look.

He had a car parked outside and my mother got into the front seat with him. We passed hotels with bright blue swimming pools and the brown tinge of the sky hung over the water, like a line of dirt on the rim of a sleeve.

My father’s apartment was in a pink stucco building. When we walked up with our suitcases, his three roommates were crowded on the porch, leaning on the iron banister. They wore white V-neck T-shirts and thick dark hair pressed out from under them. I hadn’t seen men dressed like that before.

“He told us you had long blond hair.”

“You look like your dad.”

“She’s prettier than her dad.”

When my father smiled, the gaps between his teeth made him look unintentionally sad, like a jack-o’-lantern. He looked down and I felt he was proud of me. He touched my hair. I loved him blindly, the feeling darkening over everything, but it passed.
My mother stepped up to the porch. "Don't you want to introduce me to your friends, too?"

My father introduced each man separately and each man smiled. Then my father gave me a present: a package of six different-colored cotton headbands. I held it and didn't tear the cellophane open.

My father worked as a waiter in a hotel restaurant. We had dinner there, eating slowly while he worked, watching him balance dishes on the inside of his arm. He sat down with us while my mother was sipping her coffee. He crossed one leg over the other, smoking luxuriously. My mother leaned closer and whispered in my ear.

"When are we going to Disneyland?" I asked, bluntly, saying what she said to say but somehow knowing it was wrong.

My father didn't answer me. He looked at my mother and put out his cigarette. That night in the apartment, they fought. My father's roommates closed the doors to their rooms.

"So, when are we going," my mother asked gamely, crossing one leg over the other on a dinette chair.

His shoulders sloped down. "You were late," he said finally. "You were supposed to be here Monday. When you didn't come, I lost the money I'd saved."

"In three days, how? How could you do that?"

"On the tables."

"You, you can't do this to her," my mother said, her voice gathering like a wave.

They sent me outside to the porch. I heard everything, even their breath, through the screen door. There was a box of matches on the ground and I lit them, one by one, scratching them against the concrete and then dropping them in the dirt when the flames came too close to my fingers. Finally it was
quiet. My father came out and opened the screen door and I went in.

They set up the living room couch as a bed for me. They both undressed in my father’s bedroom. He pulled off his T-shirt and sat on the bed to untie his shoes. My mother looked back at me, over her shoulder, while she unzipped her dress. Finally, she closed the door.

The next morning my father and I got up before my mother. We went to the hotel coffee shop and sat on stools at the counter. I was afraid to ask for anything; I said I wasn’t hungry. My father ordered a soft-boiled egg for himself. His eyes caught on the uniformed waitress, the coffeepot tilting from her hand, a purse on the other end of the counter. The egg came in a white coffee cup. He chopped it with the edge of a spoon, asking me if I’d ever tasted a four-minute egg. I ate a spoonful and I loved it. No other egg was ever so good. I told my father how good it was hoping we could share it. But he slid the whole cup down, the spoon in it, without looking at me and signaled the waitress for another egg.

Walking back to the apartment, he kicked sand into the air. There were no lawns in front of the parked trailers, but the sand was raked and bordered with rows of rocks. My father’s black slip-on shoes were scuffed. He was holding my hand but not looking at me.

“So we’ll go to Disneyland next trip,” he said.

“When?”

Suddenly, I wanted dates and plans and the name of a month, not to see Disneyland but to see him. Taking long steps, trying to match his pace, I wanted to say that I didn’t care about Disneyland. I dared myself to talk, after one more, two more,
three more steps, all the way to the apartment. But I never said it. All I did was hold his hand tighter and tighter.

"I don't know," he said, letting my hand drop when we came to the steps in front of his apartment.

On the plane home, I was holding the package of headbands in my lap, tracing them through the cellophane. My mother turned away and looked out the window.

"I work," she said finally. "I pay for your school and your books and your skates and your lessons. And," she said in a louder whisper, "I pay the rent."

She picked up the package of headbands and then dropped it back on my lap.

"A seventy-nine-cent package of headbands."

It wasn't fair and I knew it.

The next year my mother went back to Las Vegas without me. She and Jerry, the ice-skating pro, got married. She came back without any pictures of the wedding and Jerry moved in with us.

She said she didn't want to bother with a big wedding since it was her second marriage. She wore a dress she already had.

My mother and I spent all that summer in the arena, where Jerry ran an ice-skating school. All day long the air conditioners hummed like the inside of a refrigerator. Inside the door of my locker was a picture of Peggy Fleming. Inside my mother's was Sonja Henie. In the main office, there were framed pictures of Jerry during his days with Holiday on Ice and the Ice Capades. In them, he didn't look like himself. He had short bristly hair and a glamorous smile. His dark figure slithered backward, his arms pointing to two corners of the photograph. The lighting was yellow and false. In one of the pictures it was snowing.
We practiced all summer for the big show in August. The theme was the calendar; the chorus changed from December angels to April bunnies and May tulips. I couldn't get the quick turns in time with the older girls, so I was taken out of the chorus and given a role of my own. After the Easter number was over and the skaters in bunny costumes crowded backstage, I skated fast around the rink, blowing kisses. A second later, the Zamboni came out to clear the ice. I stood in back before my turn, terrified to go out too early or too late, with the velvet curtain bunched in my hand.

My mother came up behind me every show and gave me a push, saying "now, go" at the right time. I skated completely by instinct. I couldn't see. My eyes blurred under the strong spotlight. But one night, during the Easter dance, my mother was near the stage exit, laughing with Jerry. She kept trying to bend down to tie her laces and he pulled her up, kissing her. Finally, looking over his shoulder, she saw me and quickly mouthed "go." I went out then but it was too late. I heard the Zamboni growling behind me. I tried to run, forgetting how to skate, and fell forward, flat on the ice. My hands burned when I hurried up behind the moving spotlight and I saw that I'd torn my tights. The edges of the hole on my knee were ragged with blood.

I sat down on the ice backstage while the music for my mother's number started up. I knew it by heart. Jerry led my mother in an elementary waltz. She glinted along the ice, shifting her weight from leg to bent leg. Her skates slid out from her body. She was heavier than she had once been. She swayed, moving her head to glance off the eyes of the crowd. Under the slow spotlight, she twirled inside the box of Jerry's arms.

I quit skating after that. When my mother and Jerry went to the rink I stayed home or went out to play with the other kids.
in the neighborhood. The next year I joined the Girl Scout troop.

Eventually, my mother stopped taking lessons, too. Then Jerry went to the rink himself every day, like any other man going to a job.

One Saturday, there was a father/daughter breakfast sponsored by my Girl Scout troop. I must have told my mother about it. But by the time the day came, I'd forgotten and I was all dressed in my play clothes to go outside. I was out the front door when my mother caught me.

"Melinda."
"What?"
"Where are you going?"
"The end of the block."
"Don't you remember your Girl Scout breakfast? You have to go in and change."

I didn't want to go. I was already on the driveway, straddling my bike.

"I don't feel like going to that. I'd rather play."

My mother was wearing her housecoat, but she came outside anyway, holding it closed with one hand over her chest.

"He took the day off and he's in there now getting dressed. Now, come on. Go in and put something on."

"No," I said, "I don't want to."

"Won't you do this for me?" she whispered. "He wants to adopt you."

We stood there a minute and then the screen door opened.

"Let her go, Carol. She doesn't have to go if she doesn't want to go. It's up to her."

Jerry was standing in the doorway, all dressed up. His hair was combed down and wet from just taking a shower. He was
wearing a white turtleneck sweater and a paisley ascot. I felt sorry for him, looking serious and dressed up like that, and I wanted to change my mind and go in but I thought it was too late and I flew off on my bike. None of the other fathers would be wearing ascots anyway, I was thinking.

My father called again when I was ten, to say he wanted to take me to Disneyland. He said he was living in Reno, Nevada, with a new wife. He and my mother bickered a long time on the phone. He wanted to send a plane ticket for me to come alone. My mother said either both of us went or neither. She said she was afraid he would kidnap me. She held out. Finally, they agreed he’d send the money for two tickets.

Around this time, my mother always told me her dreams, which were about things she wanted. A pale blue Lincoln Continental with a cream-colored interior. A swimming pool with night lights and a redwood fence around the yard. A house with a gazebo you couldn’t see from the road.

She had already stopped telling Jerry the things she wanted because he tried to get them for her and he made mistakes. He approximated. He bought her the wrong kind of record player for Christmas and he got a dull gold Cadillac, a used car, for her birthday.

Before we went to California, my mother read about something she wanted. A New Sony Portable Color Television. A jewel. She wanted a white one, she was sure it came in white. In the short magazine article she’d clipped out, it said the TVs were available only in Japan until early 1967, next year, but my mother was sure that by the time we went, they would be all over California.

Jerry took us to the airport and he was quiet while we checked on our luggage. When we got onto the plane, we
forgot about him. We made plans to get my father to buy us the new Sony. It was this trip's Disneyland. We'd either win it or lose it depending on how we played.

At the airport in Los Angeles, we met Velma, my father's new wife. She was a good ten years older and rich; her fingers were full of jewelry and she had on a brown fur coat.

This trip there was no struggle. We went straight to Disneyland. We stayed in the Disneyland Hotel. The four of us went through Disneyland like a rake. There was nothing we didn't see. We ate at restaurants. We bought souvenirs.

But knowing the real purpose of our trip made talking to my father complicated. As I watched my mother laugh with him I was never sure if it was a real laugh, for pleasure, or if it was work, to get our TV. My father seemed sad and a little bumbling. With everyone else around, my father and I didn't talk much.

"How's school?" he asked, walking to the Matterhorn.

"Fine," I said. "I like it."

"That's good," he said.

Our conversations were always like that. It was like lighting single matches.

And I was getting nervous. We were leaving in a day and nothing was being done about the new Sony. The last night, Velma suggested that I meet my father downstairs in the lobby before dinner, so the two of us could talk alone. In our room, my mother brushed my hair out in a fan across my back.

I was nervous. I didn't know what to say to my father.

My mother knew. "See if you can get him to buy the TV," she said. "I bet they've got one for sale right nearby."

I said I hadn't seen any in the stores.

"I think I saw one," she said, winking, "a white one."

"What should I do?" I knew I had to learn everything.
“Tell him you’re saving up for it. He’ll probably just buy it for you.” My mother wasn’t nervous. “Suck in your cheeks,” she said, brushing glitter on my face. She was having fun.

I didn’t want to leave the room. But my mother gave me a short push and I went slowly down the stairs. I tried to remember everything she told me. Chin up. Smile. Brush your hair back. Say you’re saving for it. Suck in your cheeks. It seemed I was on the verge of losing one of two things I badly wanted. With each step it seemed I was choosing.

I saw my father’s back first. He was standing by the candy counter. Whenever I saw my father I went through a series of gradual adjustments, like when you step out of the ice rink, in summer, and feel the warm air. I had to focus my vision down from an idea as vague as a color, to him. He was almost bald. The way his chin shot out made him always look eager. He was buying a roll of Life Savers.

“Would you like anything?” he asked, seeing me and tilting his head to indicate the rows of candy arranged on the counter.

I thought for a wild moment. I could give up the plan, smile and say yes. Yes I want a candy bar. Two candy bars. He’d buy me two of the best candy bars there. I could stand and eat them sloppily, all the while gazing up at my father. If I smiled, he would smile. He would bend down and dab the chocolate from my mouth with a handkerchief moist with his own saliva.

But I didn’t say yes, because I knew it would end. I knew I’d remember my father’s face, soft on mine, next year when no letters came. I would hate my best memory because it would prove that my father could fake love or that love could end or, worst of all, that love was not powerful enough to change a life, his life.

“No,” I said, “I’m saving up my money.”
“What?” he said, smiling down at me. He was unraveling the paper from his Life Savers.

I gulped. “I’m saving my money for a new Sony portable color television,” I said.

He scanned the drugstore for a moment. I think we both knew he was relinquishing me to my mother.

“Oh,” he said finally, nodding.

We didn’t get the Sony. On the way home, neither of us mentioned it. And when the plane landed, we didn’t call Jerry. We took a taxi from the airport. When we got home, my mother collapsed on the blue-green couch and looked around the room disapprovingly. The suitcases were scattered on the floor.

“You didn’t say one big word the whole time we were there,” she said. “Here, you’re clever. You should hear yourself kidding around with Jerry. You say three syllable words and . . . There, you didn’t say one smart thing in front of him. Let me tell you, you sounded dumb.”

She imitated a dumb person, stretching her eyes wide open and puffing air into her cheeks.

She sighed. “Go out and play,” she said. “Go out and play with your friends.”

But I just stood there looking at her. She got worse. She kicked off her shoes. She began throwing pillows from the couch onto the floor.

“Not one big word. The whole time we were there,” she said.

“And you didn’t smile. Here, you’re sharp, you’re animate. There you slumped. You looked down. You really just looked ordinary. Like any other kid around here. Well, it’s a good thing we’re back because I can see now this is just where you
belong. With all the mill workers’ kids. Well, here we are. Good.”

She was still yelling when I walked out the door. Then I did something I’d never done before. I walked down to the end of our road and I hitchhiked. I got picked up by a lady who lived two blocks away. I told her I was going to the arena.

From the lobby I saw Jerry on the ice. I ran downstairs to my mother’s locker and sat alone, lacing up skates. I ran up the hall on my skate points and I ran onto the ice fast, my arms straight out to the sides. I went flying toward Jerry.

He was bending over a woman’s shoulders, steering her into a figure eight.

A second later he saw me and I was in his arms, breathing against the wool of his sweater. He put a hand over my ear and told his student something I couldn’t understand.

A few seconds later, when I pulled myself away, the student was gone. I stopped crying and then there was nothing to do. We were alone on the ice.

I looked up at Jerry; it was different than with my father. I couldn’t bury my face in Jerry’s sweater and forget the world. I stood there nervously. Jerry was still Jerry, standing in front of me shyly, a man I didn’t know. My father was gone for good and here was Jerry, just another man in the world, who had nothing to do with me.

“Would you like me to teach you to do loops?” he asked quietly.

I couldn’t say no because of how he looked, standing there with his hands in his pockets.

I glanced up at the empty stands around us. I was tired. And cold. Jerry started skating in tight, precise loops. I looked down at the lines he was making on the ice.

“I’ll try,” I said, beginning to follow them.